Vices, Virtues, and Dispositions

LORENZO AZZANO
University of Santiago de Compostela
lorenzo.az@hotmail.it

ANDREA RAIMONDI
Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology
& andrea.raimondi@thapar.edu

Abstract: In this paper, we embark on the complicated discussion about the nature of vice in Virtue Ethics through a twofold approach: first, by taking seriously the claim that virtues (and certain flavours of vices) are genuinely dispositional features possessed by agents, and secondly, by employing a pluralistic attitude borrowed from Battaly's pluralism (2008). Through these lenses, we identify three varieties of viciousness: incontinence, indifference, and malevolence. The upshot is that the notion of vice is not as categorically homogeneous as that of virtue: some states of viciousness consist in interference of present virtuous dispositions, or mimicking of absent vicious ones, whereas others can be considered genuine dispositions themselves. Furthermore, this set-up can provide an interesting, albeit highly idealized story as to how, through the interference in one's environment, one gets acquainted with vice in various degrees. Finally, this approach can be illuminating vis-à-vis Virtue Ethics in general; e.g. we can employ it to discuss more productively Johnston's (2003) objection to Hursthouse's (1999) account of moral conduct.

Keywords: Virtue ethics, Vices, Dispositions, Moral progress, Vice pluralism

Introduction

There is much discussion in Virtue Ethics about the nature of virtues; but what are we to think of vices? A quick exploration reveals an even more gerrymandered landscape than in the case of virtues: are vices merely absences of virtues, or do they have a reality in their own right? We embark on this discussion through a twofold approach: first, by taking seriously the claim that virtues (and certain flavours of vices) are genuinely dispositional features possessed by agents, and secondly, by employing a pluralistic attitude (borrowed

by Battaly 2008) in which three varieties of viciousness are individuated: incontinence, indifference, and malevolence. Our approach can illuminate the nature of vices in a number of ways, and perhaps even illuminate some issues on Virtue Ethics in general, more specifically Johnston's (2003) objection to Hursthouse's (1999) account of moral conduct.

Finally, the exploration of this tripartite distinction through dispositional lenses (especially by focusing on the so-called interference scenarios) can provide an interesting, albeit highly idealized story as to how, through the interference of one's environment, one gets acquainted with vice in various degrees. Examples are provided with the relevant literature.

1. Virtue Ethics and dispositions

1.1. Introduction to Virtue Ethics

According to Virtue Ethics moral issues are primarily about someone's character, rather than about someone's actions; about what kind of person to be, rather than what to do (see Anscombe 1958, *inter alia*). A good moral character consists of qualities the exercise of which permits one to pursue and achieve certain ideals deemed good, from which the person and those around would benefit. We call these ideals the Good; a person who pursues them, we call a virtuous person; and the means through which they pursue them, the virtues. Naturally which quality is deemed a virtue vastly depends on what we believe the Good to be. If, for example, we are persuaded of the importance of fairness and equitableness we would claim that justice is Good and, consequently, that it is good, or *virtuous*, to be just. Thus, the quality of being just corresponds to justice as a virtue. Which are the virtues? Besides justice, Plato, in the *Phaedro*, famously mentions temperance, fortitude, and discernment as those virtuous character traits that, thereafter, would have come to be known as the cardinal virtues. But the list is far from exhaustive: we now recognize a broad variety of virtues, such as courage, compassion, perseverance, integrity, generosity, prudence, and many others.

Our choice in the selection of virtues vastly depends on our preferences in Virtue Ethics, and most specifically, the relation between the Good and the virtues. For our purposes, concerning the discussions of both virtues and vices, it may be preferable to adopt a somewhat pluralistic attitude; as noticed by Battaly, different views capture different aspects of what constitutes a virtue, and it would be unproductive to try to find a sole winner, and hence a unique concept of virtue or a unique list of virtues (Battaly 2008).

For instance, drawing from Aristotle's original account, Eudaimonists such as Foot (1978; 2001), Annas (1993), and Kraut (1989), argue that what confers a

quality its status as a virtue is its relation to the Good understood as *eudaimonia*, "flourishing", or "happiness", thus, because each virtue is entirely defined in terms of its contribution to eudaimonia, the only qualities counting as virtues are the ones that latch onto it. On this view, the normativity of virtues depends, perhaps ontologically, on the normativity of the Good. Things are different in Agent-Based Virtue Ethics, where the source of normativity lies in the degree to which the virtue is entrenched in the person, and their motivations for acting virtuously (see Hursthouse 1999; Zagzebski 2004; Adams 2006). On Zagzebski's account "[w]e do not have criteria for goodness in advance of identifying the exemplars of goodness" (2004, 41), hence which of the qualities count as virtuous depends on a sort of primitive agential response, refined over time, to wanting to be like some and not wanting to be like others. The source of normativity, then, is our propensity to take a liking, which is in turn based on exemplary emotions and motives, and not human flourishing. As a consequence, Agent-Based virtue ethicists can welcome more qualities in the domain of the virtues. In a similar fashion, Swanton (2003) believes that we can be liberal about what counts as a virtuous character trait, whose moral value is already pre-theoretically grasped independently of any prior (explicit) account of the Good. Finally, Chappell (2014) and Murdoch (1971) develop a Platonic Virtue Ethics according to which virtues are not defined in terms of the Good: rather, a virtue is whatever quality the exercise of which "pierce[s] the veil of selfish consciousness and join[s] the world as it really is" (Murdoch 1971, 91). Virtues, then, have a negative role in driving our attention away from desires and passions, thus enabling us to see reality for what it is, or as Plato would have said, the Forms around us.

The Eudaimonist, Agent-Based, and Platonist options are of course not the only ones available on the market, but we can already see the different extent of the domain of virtues: the Platonic account is far more liberal than the Eudaimonistic, but, perhaps, more restrictive than the Agent-Based account, in that Platonic virtues are, to a large extent, intellectual in nature.

1.2. Virtues as dispositions

In a space where many flowers have bloomed, there seems to be one common element: virtues are dispositions (see Annas 2005, *inter alia*). As a matter of fact, the identity between virtues and dispositions is a central tenet of virtue ethics; yet this identification is so foundational that its rationale is occasionally poorly explored: why are character traits (thus, both virtues and vices) best characterized as dispositions? Clarifying this issue will be crucial for our purposes in the rest of the paper.

There are several *prima facie* reasons for the identification of virtues/vices with dispositions. In our mind, they do carry some weight, although they are not *per*

se conclusive. Firstly, the idea is that both virtues and dispositions are associated with both triggering and manifestation conditions, specifying what kind of behaviour they are meant to elicit in a given circumstance. These are meant to generate patterns in the behaviour of their bearer, which, albeit not exceptionless, are most often than not detectable. Individuals with such-and-such dispositions tend to behave in a certain way, and the same is true of individuals with such-and-such character traits. That said, the disposition can still exist, and be instantiated, in the absence of such behaviour, viz. when the triggering conditions are not met. This association is meant to showcase an important feature of Virtue Ethics: one-time or occasional behaviour is neither necessary nor sufficient to warrant the ascription of a virtue (or, as we will argue, for the ascription of a vice).

Here is an example which may showcase some of these features: we stumble upon our colleague Luigi speaking kindly of his colleagues. We might thus want to claim that Luigi is a generous person, but perhaps that wouldn't be wise; for generosity is best identified with a disposition that may, or may not, underpin that behaviour. Perhaps Luigi has only so spoken for the first and only time (in that case, we would say that he is in a momentary generous state), or merely to promote his self-interest (in that, we wouldn't describe him as generous at all); hence, albeit character traits are connected with the kind of behaviour they produce, they are not identical to it. In order for us to attribute generosity to Luigi, his generosity needs to be displayed with a certain regularity; but not necessarily: Luigi can be described as truly generous even in circumstances when his generosity does not give rise to the relevant generous actions or thoughts. He might, for instance, be alone in his room reading and thus in a situation where the conditions that are relevant for his generosity are not met. Just like dispositions, character traits need to be triggered to produce the associated action, thought, or emotion –which may or may not happen.

There are other similarities between dispositions and character traits, that might be worthwhile to consider, e.g. the fact that they both come in degrees. Famously things can be more or less disposed to a certain outcome (e.g. Bird 2007, Vetter 2015), which is reflected in everyday ascriptions of dispositions (e.g. when we say that "gold is a highly malleable metal"). Virtue Ethicists' talk of excellence may reveal that something similar occurs for virtues as well: Whereas Virtue Ethicists of the Aristotelian kind often use excellences and virtues (*arête*) interchangeably, many others use excellency to qualify the virtue instead. For example, arguing for a version of Agent-Based Virtue Ethics, Swanton claims that a virtue "is a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way" (2003, 19; see also Crisp 2010). Hence, virtues, like dispositions, can be possessed to a higher or a lesser degree, with excellency being the highest; and each virtue can be exercised more or less. A

highly generous person, for example, might help others more often than not, whether because they do so more frequently under the same triggering circumstances, or because they do so in more triggering circumstances. What is more, talk of gradable dispositions provides some ground for a theory of moral praiseworthiness: an agent comes to have the relevant virtue to a higher degree by confronting morally challenging situations more often than not. To be courageous, for example, calls the agent to manifest its braveness. But, to be sure, it is not easy to be brave when the situation calls. And, as Aristotle argues in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, this is why we attribute valour to those that, when the time comes, manifest their courage. According to Aristotle, virtues are not natural qualities because, unlike natural qualities, those who bear them are responsible for their virtue, and because of this we deem them praiseworthy. Agent-Based virtue ethicists might also be content with the fact that our primitive, theoretical grasp of the nature of virtues stands on a solid foundation, without requiring any relation to a pre-established Good. In fact, if virtues are nothing but dispositions to think, feel, and act in a certain way, the nature of a virtue is exhausted by the dispositions themselves.

Before we move on to the discussion of vices, we would like to stress out the metaphysical relevance of the identity of dispositions and character traits such as virtues and vices. After all, we did preface this section with the claim that these are *prima facie* reasons for this identification. The reason is very simple: that dispositions have stimuli and manifestations, that they come in degrees, that they are (somehow) associated with possibility, are *per se* quite uncontroversial statements, mostly orthogonal to the issues discussed in the metaphysics of dispositions proper. The same claims could be endorsed, properly reconstructed, in a metaphysical set-up where no genuine disposition is actually present, perhaps as claims about conditionals, or laws of nature, or something of that sort. Dispositional talk might be, so to speak, just a *façon de parler* with no real metaphysical import; thus our claim to have a "dispositional account" of vices would be but a spurious application of the metaphysics of dispositions, one of the many Bird (2016) tried to warn us about in describing the pernicious tendency of the metaphysics of dispositions to overextend itself. In a way, everyone agrees that there are dispositions (and perhaps everyone also agrees that virtues are dispositions, as above). But without a proper metaphysics, claims like this mean very little.

This is of course not the place to develop an extensive background on the metaphysics of dispositions, nor to qualify it as an account of the realist variety about dispositions (for some recent efforts, besides Bird 2016, see Azzano 2019, Vetter 2020, and Tugby 2021). Yet we would like to put forward some crucial assumptions about virtues and vices as dispositions that will make our claims not as toothless as the above criticism suggests: crucially, we think that (at least

some) dispositions are intrinsic features of their bearers that may be possessed independently from the environment they find themselves in, and may continue to be instantiated in massively interfered scenarios, viz. in scenarios in which their manifestation is constantly prevented from occurring. We are skeptical of the claim that all dispositions are intrinsic (see McKitrick 2003), but it is a crucial feature of interference scenarios that the relevant dispositions persist in being instantiated independently from the external circumstances (on the correlation between interferences and intrinsicness, see Choi 2003).

Interference scenarios are commonplace in the literature on dispositions (starting from Johnson 1992, Martin 1994, Bird 1998), and constitute everyday occurrences: fragile objects are often protected by packing material to prevent them from breaking; radioactive material can be exposed to moderating boron rods to prevent it from melting, and so forth (see Fara 2005; Choi 2011; *inter alia*). Some of these interferences are not random occurrences, but rather systematic, in the sense that their occurrence co-varies with a disposition's triggering circumstances with some modal strength. Thus, the claim that there are, or there can be, systematically interfered (intrinsic) dispositions amounts to the claim that these dispositions do not manifest as they should, even in the most paradigmatic circumstances. The way we see it, a glass wrapped in bubble wrap, that wouldn't crack even after the most violent strike, still possesses the potential for breaking that we would normally call fragility. More generally, dispositions are not superficial features to be equated with conditional facts about their bearers, but are genuine features possessed by objects independently from their environment. Sometimes, this environment involves interferences: as such, dispositional ascriptions may be true whereas the correspondent counterfactual conditionals are false, or *vice versa*; we will see many of such cases below. Claims like this will come as no news for the reader well-versed in the relevant literature[1] but no less important: after all, Martin's (1994) interference counterexample to the dispositional analysis of dispositions, based on similar cases, is the *locus classicus* in the literature on the metaphysics of dispositions, and as later recognized in Choi (2003), the claim that dispositions are intrinsic is an important element contributing to the impossibility of factoring dispositional talk into conditional talk (also see Eagle 2009). Details, of course, differ from account to account: but with some approximation when we claim that virtues and vices are dispositions, we mean something theoretically primitive *vis-à-vis* counterfactual talk, or other conceptual resources within the nomic family; in other words, to pursue our project we will need to take talk of dispositions seriously.[2]

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[1] The asymmetry between dispositional and conditional talk were perhaps first explicitly discussed in Goodman (1954).

[2] This paper operates at a certain degree of abstraction concerning the nature of virtues *qua* dispositions. There's space for manoeuvre, of course. An interesting suggestion is the following:

2. Vices as dispositions

We now have at least a tentative grasp on what a virtue is, and in what sense it is a disposition. What about *vices*? This is the main topic of the rest of the paper, to be discussed upon the background provided so far.

2.1. Vices in Virtue Ethics

Vices have never taken the centre stage of Virtue Ethics. This is primarily because, as *per* any moral theory, the aim of Virtue Ethics is to illustrate how to be moral. Nevertheless, inevitably, discussions of virtues unavoidably suggest considerations about their mirroring images: vices. The list of vices is perhaps even longer than that of virtues. The most famous are perhaps the deadly sins: sloth, pride, envy, covetousness, lust, gluttony, and wrath (see Bloomfield 1952; Taylor 2006). But someone might be vicious by being lazy, inconsiderate, intolerant, selfish, arrogant, hypocritical, ungrateful, and so on.

Curiously, and most interestingly for our current purposes, there is perhaps even more disagreement about the nature of vices than there is about the nature of virtues. Traditionally, e.g. according to the Aristotle of the Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, vices occur when the capacity to come to correct judgments about practical matters is compromised, and virtues fail to hit the mean. Similarly, Plato in Book IV of the *Republic* claims that a vice consists in having too much or too little of something which, in his harmonic form, would be consistent with virtue. As Hurka stresses (2001, 104), for Aristotle and Plato there are no *pure* vices; vices are rather excesses and defects associated with virtues; they are, more precisely, contraries of virtues. What this picture suggests, is that while virtues may very well be dispositions, vices need not be. Similarly, patristic scholars, in according to Christian metaphysics, denied the reality of evil; e.g., Lombard, following Augustine, claims that because evil does not exist in its own right, vices are absences of virtues, rather than realities in themselves (II.35.4.1). Thus, to explain why someone has acted viciously by reacting with too much fear we only need to appeal to his practical reason. It would be improper to drag the virtuous disposition in the explanation: it would be unlovely to claim that vicious behaviour is the manifestation of virtuous dispositions, for virtuous dispositions

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some friends of dispositions believe that directionality, viz. pointing to a manifestation, is a crucial feature of genuinely dispositional properties (e.g. Armstrong 1997, Molnar 2003, *inter alia*). Despite disagreements about the nature of this directionality, it is worth pointing out that Aristotelian virtues enjoy a similar teleological flavour: for Aristotle, eudaimonia is the highest good for humans, and the virtues are "the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well" (1998: 42-1106a); virtues can achieve this result because they are directed toward eudaemonia; they are virtues *for* the Good. We leave this topic for another time.

have allegedly only virtuous behaviour as their proper manifestation. If this were not the case, they would not be reliable means to achieve the good, or would not constitute the Good. Rather, what we may say is that the virtuous dispositions "misfired": the disposition was present, it was exercised, but the relative manifestation did not occur. In Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle informs us that vices so understood profile the morally weak person, a person that has knowledge of what they ought to do but, because they are overpowered in their practical deliberation, fail to attain the good (1146b32). This vicious person, often referred to by Aristotle as the *incontinent* (*akratic*) has, we might say, their virtuous disposition interfered by other character traits or features of the environment.

Let us call a person whose virtuous dispositions are systematically interfered, the Incontinent: the Incontinent can act viciously, on occasion, but not necessarily so: they act viciously when their virtuous disposition is interfered. As already hinted before, interfering scenarios are ubiquitous in the literature of dispositions. In the case of the Incontinent, the idea is that the person possesses other character traits (perhaps other dispositions as well), the presence of which prevents the virtuous dispositions from manifesting correctly. According to Aquinas too, interference with the right order of reason and passion is the mark of vices (Bejczy 2020, 2008–2009). In a sense, dispositions are still part of the explanation of vicious actions, but such actions do not, *per se*, stem from a vicious disposition; nor it is the case that the interfered dispositions must be vicious dispositions. The Incontinent merely pursues passions and desires, which are not *per se* vicious. For example, they might fail to drink in moderation (despite knowing how to), prompted by their desire to try several new beers from a new brewery they are just visiting: this desire is in no way vicious, and nonetheless when they do so their actions are blameable (1111a25-b4). Ultimately, the Incontinent is vicious by falling short of their virtues (if vicious at all).

Friends of the Agent-Based approach might complain about this understanding of vices, which makes them derivative from virtues, a mere by-product. One *prima facie* reason to be suspicious is that, if virtues are traits, so must be vices; and if the former are traits that attain the good, the second must presumably be traits that attain the bad. An Agent-Based theorist might accuse the Aristotelian of putting forward a disunified metaphysics. But there is more to the accusation. As Zagzebski (2004) and Adams (2006) claim, a vice understood as acting against the requirement of virtues must be understood as an act grounded in the appropriate vicious motivations. The idea is the following: without looking at the motivation behind the malevolent manifestation we cannot discriminate against someone that merely went wrong in their rational assessment from someone who wanted, and had reasons to, act viciously. This is an old distinction, of course. Aristotle himself recognises this problem: although

the morally weak person may perform a vicious action, it is problematic to deem them vicious: after all they are, in their choice, in conflict with themselves, and may very well show regret for their action; yet there is another sense according to which the vicious person is one which lacks any regret and is at peace with their decision (1151a10; 1150b29-30; see also Battaly 2014, 66). Likewise, mediaeval theologians, most prominently Aquinas, claim that vices are not absences of good qualities, but themselves bad qualities (Bejczy 2020, 2008–2009). Thus enter the Malevolent, different from the Incontinent in the sense that they possess such bad qualities and thus engage in vicious actions, feelings, and thoughts, not by mistake, but through deliberation. They act on choice rather than appetite (*epithumia*): whereas the Incontinent ultimately cares about being good, the Malevolent is bad through and through. To use Hurka's terminology (2001, 93), the Malevolent is a mirror image of the virtuous, a *purely* vicious person, in the sense that their vices (*kakiai*) stem from genuine dispositions.

We can now see how discussion about vices is more complicated than the discussion about virtues: whereas the existence of virtues qua dispositions appear to be somewhat uncontroversial, it is far more complicated to argue for the correspondent claim about vices, with different philosophical sensibilities pulling in different directions. Take for example, gluttony: friends of vice-as-incontinence would notice, and rightly so, that in order to avoid gluttony one must moderate their food consumption, avoiding excesses; moderation in food consumption does not require assuming that there are vice-conducive and non-vice-conducive dishes, so that moderation consists of assuming the latter but not the former. A moderate person is someone who has the proper attitude toward consuming any food: so if a virtuous agent is one who eats conscientiously, the gluttonous is merely one who fails to do so. On the other hand, friends of genuine, positive, vices might point out that there is a matter of rational deliberation that does not merely amount to a lack of moderation. For example, a gluttonous person is not merely one who non-conscientiously eats great quantities of salad, but if they went on their way to seek for great quantities of enticing dishes: in gluttony, quality seems to matter as much as quantity. In a sense, even the gluttonous person has to act conscientiously, in the sense that they have to deliberate over what is most vicious to eat: they have, then, a genuine disposition toward gluttony such that they will opt for more vice-conducive meals.

This is but one example of a vast taxonomy. What is more, the Incontinent and the Malevolent, so understood, hardly exhaust the taxonomy of the vicious. Following a popular distinction, we will also introduce a third variety of vice, which we will call the Indifferent. This heterogeneity may strike the reader as problematic; failures to find an all-encompassing account of vices, running parallel to accounts of virtue introduced before, is something that Annas (1977)

and Hampton (1990) already emphasised, in relation to Aristotle and Virtue Ethics more generally. The way we see it, again to echo Battaly (2008; 2015), is that a pluralistic account of vices is preferable, and that there is no unique and univocal notion of vice that triumphs over the others. There's no point harping on whether the Incontinent or the Malevolent is really vicious, a question which risks turning into a semantic debate very quickly: for even the vices of the Malevolent are just *primus inter pares*. On the contrary, we will show that the tripartite distinction between the Incontinent, the Indifferent, and the Malevolent, yields an interesting account of how we acquire vices *qua* dispositions, in which the competing contenders for the role of "real" vice are just stages of the process of becoming vicious. In other words, these varieties of viciousness may turn out to be a feature, as opposed to a bug, of our account.

2.2. Varieties of viciousness

We know by now that the Incontinent can be deemed vicious but, in a sense, is not completely so: they can be gluttonous or cowardly, but can be so on occasion, while being moderate or brave on others. The Incontinent tends toward the good, and their failure to achieve it might be categorised as a mistake. Vices characterising the Incontinent are of the most familiar kind: they involve a disproportion in thinking, feeling, and acting: lust, anger, drunkenness, pride, and avarice, but also workaholism, chauvinism, and idolatry (see Adams 2006, 38). Such a person is surely vicious, but their motives should be taken into account. Thus, Aristotle, when comparing them with the Malevolent, claims that the Incontinent is like the epileptic, while the properly vicious is like someone with a chronic disease (1151a33). While the first can be cured, the second cannot; they are continuously bad (1150b34). The Malevolent acts viciously with motives, thoughts, and desires that are vicious. Not only that: the Malevolent is meant as a mirror image of the virtuous: as the virtuous desires to act under the guidance of virtue because they are the source of good, and consequently desires the Good not for themselves only but for others too, so does the Malevolent love their own evil and take pleasure in other people's pain. Just like the virtuous, and unlike the Incontinent, the Malevolent is characterised by a lack of internal conflict.[3] Satan is a good example of this pure evil, since he is not only evil, but he is on a quest to propagate evil, from which he takes great pleasure (see Adams 2006, 38–41).

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[3] Although this point too is somewhat controversial. In Book IX Aristotle seems to suggest that the Incontinent and the Malevolent are similar to the extent that the latter, just like the former, is hardly at peace with their vices, and rather suffers as a result of their misdeeds. Aristotle states that "the vicious are full of regret" (1166b25) because they cannot escape the memories of their past actions, and that "like the morally weak, are in conflict with themselves" (1166b 7-8).

The ontological difference between the Incontinent and the Malevolent is quite simple: while the Incontinent may very well possess virtuous dispositions, the Malevolent does not, and possess genuinely vicious dispositions. There's a third option, of course: one can lack dispositions either way. Thus enter our third variety of viciousness, what we call the Indifferent: the basic idea is that while, for the Incontinent, there still is a drive for the Good, in the Indifferent such a disposition to do good is removed. Battaly (2014, 73) captures the character of the Indifferent as someone lacking moral motivations; as *per* Williams (1993, 5–13), the Indifferent is someone in the vicinity of the amoralist. There's a difference, however: unlike the amoralist, the Indifferent has knowledge of the Good: if indifference is a vice, it is because the agent under consideration, despite knowing what is good, decides not to act accordingly. Unlike the Incontinent, the Indifferent is not making any rational mistake, nor will they regret their inaction. Finally, unlike the Malevolent, they have no desire to bring about evil.

This concludes our preliminary exploration of these varieties of vice: we will now illustrate how a dispositional understanding can illuminate them.

2.3. A dispositional spectrum of viciousness

Let us begin with the Incontinent. We do not characterise incontinence cases as one-shot cases of deliberating and acting inappropriately: to some extent, the Incontinent is disposed to act against the command of virtues as a result of their passion. Again, contrary to the Malevolent, they do not act on a decision but are frequently a victim of the circumstances.

These circumstances involve certain other character traits of the agent which function as interferences: these character traits, themselves dispositions, can standardly be understood as passions. With this, we do not simply mean to acknowledge the obvious fact that the situation a person finds themselves in is a significant determinant of how they will behave; rather, what we claim is that the presence of these triggering circumstances can be understood as a specific class of virtue-interferences. More specifically, *mimicking* (Johnston 1992; Bird 1998). Mimicking circumstances are such that there exists an interfering factor in virtue of which x exhibits the manifestation of a disposition without possessing it. As Bird nicely puts it:

> For example, consider a robust iron cooking pot that is definitely not fragile. However it is attached to a powerful bomb with a very sensitive detonator. Should the pot be struck or dropped the detonator will cause the bomb to go off and the pot to shatter as a result. So the counterfactual, 'if the pot were struck, it would break' is true but it is not a fragile pot. (2007, 29)

The idea is that we can explain the behavior of the Incontinent without primarily appealing to any of its virtuous dispositions (just like, say, the sturdiness of the bomb-strapped iron pot is not primarily responsible for its destruction). Sins of incontinence are ones in which virtuous dispositions "misfire" only in the roundabout way that vicious dispositions are mimicked, viz. their behaviour is replicated in their absence. We can offer at least an example of this phenomenon, viz. what is sometimes dubbed the "bystander effect" (BE). In its original framework (see Latané & Darley 1968: 1969: 1970), BE refers to the phenomenon in which the presence of bystanders influences an individual's likelihood of helping a person in an emergency situation. There are a number of cases, reported in the news (see Rosenthal 1964; *inter alia*), where violence occurs but none of the bystanders does anything to prevent the incident. Before the introduction of BE the common explanation of these occurrences referred to the indifference or apathy of the agents involved. The introduction of BE disproved this hypothesis (Latané & Darley 1969) emphasising, instead, two facts: firstly, each individual bystander is disposed to help someone in danger, *if taken in isolation*; secondly, (with a certain degree of idealization) the larger the group of bystanders, the less likely one is to properly manifest this disposition. It's easy to see how we can understand BE as a case of mimicking: a bystander is disposed toward helping those in need involved in a dangerous situation; in other terms, they instantiate the virtuous disposition to manifest bravery, yet external circumstances, such as the presence of bystanders, cause to behave as if they possess a contrary vicious disposition, although they don't (the crowd in BE functions as Bird's bomb-plus-detonator).

It is important to notice how our account can only function previa a serious ontology of dispositions, in which dispositional ascriptions cannot be taken as shortcuts for counterfactual conditional or other similar items. Virtuous and vicious dispositions are genuine and intrinsic features that are possessed independently from a context that might turn the correspondent conditional false. This is the case of the Incontinent: although the virtuous disposition to, say, help people in need were to be instantiated, the correspondent conditional "if someone were in danger, I would help them" is false; contrariwise, although no vicious disposition is present, the conditional "if someone were in danger, I would ignore them" is true. Similarly, the presence of the virtuous disposition in a massively interfered scenario is what allows us to find truthmakers for sentences like "the agent could have resisted the temptation to act in such-and-such a manner", the truthmaker being the virtuous disposition itself (see Jacobs 2010 for dispositions as truthmakers for counterfactual conditionals). Things are different for the Malevolent, for which no such truthmaker can be found, thus turning this truth into a falsehood: the Malevolent could not have resisted the temptation and acted virtuously, for they lack the relevant virtues.

Three things are interesting to notice about the Incontinent, so understood. Firstly, as the number of people who are present in an emergency situation increases, the less likely it is that any individual will help someone in need: that means that the mimicking can generate cases where not only does it seem as if the individual has the vicious disposition, but also that this alleged disposition is possessed to a higher or a lesser degree. Secondly, although BE specifically concerns emergency situations, we can see how this case generalises to others where there are contextual interfering factors. We do believe, in fact, that many vices of the Incontinent can be so explained: we can interpret lust, gluttony, drunkenness, smokiness, or workaholism as cases where someone cares disproportionally about sex, drinks, food, tobacco, and productivity either because of peer pressure or because the circumstances call for excessive reaction, like in the example mentioned before where the Incontinent, despite knowing how to drink in moderation, might fail to do so prompted by the abundance of new beers in the new brewery. There are also reasons to think that the present account can be extended to intellectual vices, as per Cassam (2016; 2019). Cassam puts forward a theory of vice *à la* Driver (2001), which he dubs Obstructivism, according to which *x* counts as a vice if *x* is an "intellectual limit", that is, a trait, a thinking style, or an attitude that obstructs the acquisition, retention, and transmission of knowledge. And this seems to be exactly what is going on in the case we just discuss, for the Incontinent fails to retain their virtuous behaviour in the face of events.

Unlike the Incontinent, the Malevolent lacks a virtuous disposition and rather possesses a vicious one. Thus, because the vices of the Malevolent stem from genuine vices *qua* dispositions, the Malevolent is vicious more often than not and, certainly, more often than the Incontinent. It stands to reason that sometimes their behaviour will be different. But some other times, it will align, and on some very special occasion, it will align systematically, due to systematic interferences (in our account mimicking circumstances) that give the Incontinent their name. Yet the underlying ontology of dispositions allows us to keep the two separate. After all, the Malevolent will lack any virtuous disposition to help a stranger, and will rather possess a vicious disposition to, say, passively observe the violence for their pleasure; by way of BE, the Incontinent and the Malevolent will in fact behave in very similar ways. Yet their dispositions, and thus their motives, for doing so are very different. To be sure, one has to appreciate how systematic these mimicking circumstances must be for the similarities to arise between the Incontinent and the Malevolent; consider this other (less dramatic) example: suppose that Luigi has the disposition to drink in moderation; nevertheless, confronted by peer pressure, he behaves as if he would have acted out of vices, in virtue of the mimicking mechanism described above. Now suppose that Luigi *exclusively* goes out drinking when accompanied by his department colleagues;

it now seems that in every instance in which Luigi goes out drinking, he fails to do so in moderation. If such cases are possible, and we think they are, a Malevolent Luigi and an Incontinent Luigi would be virtually indistinguishable. There is, again, a difference in their motives. But we are in no way arguing that the two are identical, just that there are similarities that justify talking of our Incontinent as a stage toward higher vicious stages (more on that later).

The case of the Indifferent is more elusive than the previous two. On some occasions, one can conceive the Indifferent as acting just like the Incontinent and the Malevolent, but for different reasons; e.g. in the bystander example discussed above concerning BE, one can imagine the Indifferent failing to take action not because of BE (like the Incontinent), nor because of malice (like the Malevolent), but out of sheer indifference. As Adams points out, vices of indifference are "one of the deepest mysteries about moral excellence and badness" (2006, 45). This is because indifference captures cases where "a vice, incompatible with good moral character, is constituted by an absence of concern for an important good, rather than by the presence of an opposition or hostility" (2006, 45). We think we can make progress in understanding indifference by looking at it through dispositional lenses. Recall, again, the mimicking situation of the bystander: the Incontinent bystander fails to manifest bravery, yet they are full of regrets about their (in)action. The Indifferent, however, is someone who, facing someone else's suffering, remains unmoved: it is not the case that they do not recognise something as evil, or that they fail to recognize the right thing to do; they are just indifferent to the other's pain, or other items such as false beliefs held by others that might cause them harm. In this guise, Hurka (2001, 94–95) considers callousness an exemplar vice of indifference, together with apathy and shamelessness; Adams (2006, 44–47) adds ruthlessness to the picture. Ontologically, all these cases have a unique make-up: they don't involve the instantiation of a vicious disposition, as per the Malevolent, but neither do they involve the possession of a virtuous disposition: simply put, the Indifferent lacks motivation either way.[4] It is crucial to notice that our notion of the Indifferent is one of a highly idealized agent. A state of indifference is one which otherwise virtuous (or vicious) agents might be lead temporarily or progressively; we can say a little bit more about this by considering again the phenomenon of interferences to dispositions, and more specifically by considering cases of *finking* (Martin 1994, Lewis 1997). To quote Bird (2007, 25):

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[4] Our characterization of the Indifferent is a byproduct of our previous characterization of the Malevolent, viz. as one who knows which is the Good, and yet deliberates differently. In a similar fashion, the Indifferent is not ignorant of the Good, but lacks motivation either way.

> [A]n electro-fink is a device that can make an electric wire live or dead. It also detects whether the wire is being touched by a conductor. Let us take 'live' to mean 'disposed to conduct a current when touched by a conductor'. Let the wire be live; it is properly connected to an electric generator. Let the electro-fink operate by making the wire dead (cutting the connection to the generator) whenever it is touched by a conductor. Thus the wire is live. But were the wire to touch a conductor, the electro-fink would cause it to become dead and it would not conduct a current. So something can be live (disposed to conduct a current when touched by a conductor) yet it is false that if it were touched by a conductor it would conduct a current.

Put in another way, the circumstances that act as a stimulus for the disposition are also the condition for its loss. As our guiding example, we take the case of one virtue, charity, and highlight a triggering situation, an encounter with a beggar, that acts as a fink, causing the loss of the disposition.[5]

The phenomenon of beggars is widely researched and discussed in many areas, from sociology (McIntosh & Erskine 2000), to anthropology (Butovskaya, Diakonov, Salter 2002), to, of course, philosophy (Moen 2014; Allais 2015). Although the phenomenon is wide-spreading, some occurrences are poorly understood. For example, although the disposition of high-status individuals to act with charity is almost a cross-cultural universal, people more often than not fail to give to beggars. They remain unmoved by their sorrow, that is, indifferent. By investigating the people's experiences and attitudes in these circumstances, McIntosh and Erskine report that, although people are disposed to donate, consistent views about the begging encounters are in fact rare (2000, 3). Motives behind this attitude are illustrative of the charity disposition being finked, and,

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[5] There's of course another reading of this scenario (we would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for stressing this point): the beggar scenario might be framed not as a finking scenario, but one in which the disposition does not fire at all.

We think this is not a very appealing proposition. Suppose that I fail to give money to a beggar because of, say, race- or class-based prejudice. One might decide to incorporate the interfering factor in the stimulus, so that this might not count as an interference scenario. Thus generosity might be characterised (at least partially, since we are probably dealing with a multi-track disposition here), as a *disposition to give money to beggars, unless victims of our race- or class-based prejudice*. But is this what generosity is?

One of the lessons that we can learn from the literature on interference counterexamples to the conditional analysis of dispositions, is that although such scenarios might be dealt with by properly qualifying stimulus and/or manifestation specifications, this runs the risk of compromising the nature of the disposition itself, up to and including complete trivializations (e.g. *ceteris paribus* clauses). This seems to be the fate of generosity, once understood as a massively qualified disposition to give money to beggars. As a matter of fact, this kind of procedure is particularly malignant in the case of virtues *qua* dispositions: if every interference to generosity can be incorporated *qua* stimulus, as an excuse to not exercise it, can one ever fail to be generous?

almost across the board, reflect the troubling nature of the encounter. People more often than not see the triggering circumstances as not genuine (2000, 4). This is echoed by Moen (2014) who argues against giving to beggars from the premise that, compared to the poor, beggars have access to the "high-society" and so a pound in their money is a pound wasted. Their needs are not "genuine". Another consideration focuses on the moral status of the triggering circumstance. For example, some other people see the beggars as "moral strangers" (McIntosh & Erskine 2000, 5), someone whose presence challenges and undermines their set of values and the understanding of their own lives (O'Neill 1999). Something in the vicinity of this is envisaged by Kant who, arguing against giving to beggars, claims that:

> A poor man who begs is constantly depreciating his personhood and abasing himself; he makes his existence dependent on other people, and accustoms others, by the sight of him, to the means whereby we neglect our own worth. (2001, 605)

How is the Indifferent at fault, here? Like the Incontinent, the Indifferent fails to be virtuous, but the reason for the failure is here different from the one of the former. There is no rational failure involved, and the subjects recognise the circumstance where they would donate if they were exposed to them. Nevertheless, these circumstances, which should allegedly act as triggers for the virtuous disposition, are now perceived as vicious in nature, or at least estranged from the good. The same circumstance that triggers a disposition for the good is such that, if the disposition is exercised, it would lead to something considered bad. Because there is no good in possessing a disposition to donate whose manifestation results in a morally bad occurrence, like an electro-fink, the triggering event acts by removing the person's disposition to donate. We are, of course, not claiming that we develop the same indifference in other cases in which the disposition is triggered; only that some of these cases are akin to finks, causing the loss of the disposition so that, if the only circumstances encountered are the beggars one, the person can be deemed to have lost their virtue of charity. According to Adams (2006, 44–45), for instance, the Indifferent is not opposed to the good but, more modestly, ends up disregarding it, in itself or in others. What is captured by this Agent-Based approach is the motivational element behind the occurrence of this vice, the same element that is reported by McIntosh and Erskine (2000).

Taking stock: by being Incontinent, someone is being vicious by finding themselves in a situation where they act *as if* they were vicious. On the other hand, by being Indifferent someone is being vicious by having their virtuous dispositions removed.

With the *incontinent-indifferent-malevolent* triad in place, our attempt to bring ontological unity to the vice house, under the flag of dispositions, can be considered complete. A final but crucial conclusion that we can draw from this observation is that, from our pluralistic standpoint, vice is not a categorically univocal phenomenon. A vice can be the presence of something, or the lack of something else; what unifies our treatment of vice is rather the dispositional treatment of both vices and virtues *qua* dispositions.

This treatment is only possible, incidentally, once a certain degree of realism concerning dispositions is assumed. The Incontinent and the Malevolent may manifest very similar (vicious) behaviors, and may satisfy the same counterfactual conditionals; yet their dispositional ascriptions are underpinned by very different underlying properties: this background metaphysical difference is exactly what allows for a variety of vicious agents to be distinguished.

2.4. Turning to vice

So far, we have studied our three varieties of viciousness in isolation; but what about their relation? There's an argument to be made for the claim that we should not conceive the Incontinent, the Indifferent, and the Malevolent as self-contained unrelated flavours of vice, but rather as progressive stages in one's descent to vice. After all, just like there is a way to become virtuous, there is also a way to become vicious: as such, the aforementioned varieties of viciousness might be understood as progressive stages of vice. There is, of course, in any hypothetical transition from a stage of incontinence to a stage of malevolence (passing, perhaps, through a state of indifference), a psychological aspect to be studied concerning how the relevant dispositions, and the correspondent motivations, are acquired and lost by the agent; the way we see it, the study of this aspect primarily belongs to moral psychology, and, as such, cannot be investigated in this paper. We can, however, gesture towards an account which focuses on the ontological underpinning of this transition.

A crucial thing to keep in mind is that virtues and vices, when both understood genuinely as dispositions, can be acquired and lost: we do have at least an inkling of a theory as to how that happens; according to the Aristotelian tradition, such character traits, just like abilities, can be progressively acquired through exercise, and lost without it. Let us begin with the Incontinent; such an agent may very well be similar to a virtuous person, character-wise: yet environmental pressure might lead them to what we may call, a lack of exercise concerning virtuous dispositions (think about the moderation of our colleague Luigi, who is faced with peer-pressure whenever he goes out for drinks with his other colleagues). Mimicking circumstances such as the ones above constitute an excellent example

of such environmental pressure, but others may exist. The important part is that the Incontinent is therefore faced with a veritable training in vice, and finds themselves more and more acquainted with behaviour that we might call vicious. Eventually, the lack of exercise vis-à-vis their virtuous disposition might lead to losing such character traits: in an highly idealised scenario, this is what marks the transition from a stage of incontinence to one of indifference. At this point, the contrary happens concerning vicious dispositions: constantly interfered behaviour counts as exercise towards their acquisition, which eventually leads the agent to the path of becoming the Malevolent.

Of course this is a highly idealised scenario, not only because it ignores the mechanisms of moral psychology underpinning these shifts in dispositions and motivations, but because, being both virtues and vices dispositions, and thus gradable (as above), such shifts take time, display nuances, and do not need to be fully completed: incontinence, indifference, and malevolence, are not absolute moral states, but limiting cases across a spectrum on which an agent may position itself.

A final but crucial conclusion that we can draw from this observation is that, from our pluralistic standpoint, vice is not a categorically univocal phenomenon. A vice can be the presence of something, or the lack of something else; what unifies our treatment of vice is rather the dispositional treatment of both vices and virtues qua dispositions, and the positioning of the varieties of vice on a progressive spectrum.

3. Vices, virtues, and dispositions

As a final remark, we want to briefly sketch a way we can put these results to work by offering a different angle on Johnson's objection (2003) to Hursthouse's virtue-based theory of moral conduct (1999). Like any other normative theory in ethics, Virtue Ethics needs to offer a guiding principle for good actions. According to Hursthouse, Virtue Ethicists must endorse the following:

> (V): An action A is right for S in circumstances C if and only if a completely virtuous agent would characteristically A in C. (1999, 28)

The idea is that, provided that moral progress is possible, becoming virtuous is a matter of doing what a "completely virtuous agent" would do. This agent is, admittedly, an idealised character that possesses *all* the virtues *completely* (Slote 1995; 2001; *inter alia*), meaning that "is aware of all of the morally relevant features of the circumstances pertaining to the act under evaluation and … (in the circumstances) acts (or refrains from acting) in ways that express the relevant set of virtues." (Timmons 2001, 280). Here's the problem in Johnson's own words:

> Consider this person: he is mendacious, lying even about unimportant things such as the films he has seen or books he has read. [. . .] Suppose now that a friend calls him on the carpet for lying, and as a result he decides that he must change.[. . .] His task will not be simple. Lying has become habitual and has permeated his attitudes so deeply that no "decision to do better" can by itself change him. What sorts of steps might he take? [. . .] there are many things he might do [. . .] he decides to begin writing down lies that he tells, no matter how insignificant, to become more aware of his habits and to keep track of improvements.[. . .] Common sense would regard these kinds of things as what he morally ought to do in circumstances such as these, at least insofar as they will improve his character. Yet all are utterly uncharacteristic of completely virtuous agents. (2003, 817–818)

This is worrisome. If moral progress is possible, then a moral "novice" must be able to perform some actions toward moral progress. The actions that a novice must perform are only those prescribed by the appeal to the virtuous agent. Nevertheless, the virtuous agent won't do any of the actions that the novice would need to do to progress. Hence, moral progress is not possible. We think, however, that our account shows that it is not correct to claim that the virtuous agent won't do the things that the novice would.

What sets the two apart is that the former, but not the latter, is *completely* virtuous, and is aware of all the morally relevant features of the circumstances pertaining to the "right" actions. There are no circumstances where the virtuous agent should "keep track of his improvement" and, hence, no actions that the novice can take as an example to progress morally. So, both have a virtuous disposition, just possessed to a different degree, with different degrees of *morally* relevant circumstances. But, as we have seen in our examples of the Incontinent we can possess a virtuous disposition and still end up acting viciously. So, the possession of the virtuous disposition is not sufficient to exclude, from the range of actions performed by the ideal virtuous agent, those aimed at avoiding vicious-triggering circumstances. Moreover, notice that those are circumstances of which the ideal virtuous agent might not be intrinsically aware of. They are only aware of the *morally* relevant features. Nevertheless, many of the relevant features are clearly non-moral: the number of people in the group, a crucial difference-maker for incontinence, is a non-moral feature; likewise, the features that might switch the moral evaluation in the context of giving to beggars, like the age or the gender of the beggar (Butoskaya, Diakanov, Salter 2002), seem non-moral too. Thus, despite being *completely* virtuous, the ideal agent must perform (at least some) actions that the novice too must perform. The difference might lay in the fact that while, for the latter, these actions result, or tend to result, in moral progress, for the former they constitute a sort of "moral maintenance". Now

Johnson might revise, in the light of our account, the definition of *completely virtuous* as to include the fact that the ideal agent cannot have their dispositions interfered the way we allowed. However, we find this solution rather wanting. Following this revision, the ideal agent is such that it is impossible for them to do other than what their dispositions tend them to do, for they are intrinsically unfinkable and unmaskable. But a virtuous agent is such properly because, while she could do the bad, he chooses to do the good. And this is why she is an example for moral novices. As Johnson himself admits "Certainly any conception of a completely virtuous agent should be a human, rather than an impossibly god-like, ideal" (2003, 812). It seems that, after all, knowing the limits of morals and all the ways to be vicious, can contribute to a better understanding of the virtues, and the demand they put on us.

Conclusions

Our purpose in this paper was to bring some degree of ontological clarity to the divided house of theories about vice. We pursued this clarification in the spirit of Battaly's Pluralism, that is, by maintaining that the notion of vice is not categorically homogeneous: some states of viciousness consist in interferences, and mimicking of actually absent vicious features, whereas others, like virtues, are more ontologically substantial.

More to the point, we argued that some vicious phenomena can be explained via dispositional occurrences, such as dispositional finks and mimics, so that we are not necessarily forced to understand them only under the lens of genuine dispositions' instantiation. Because Virtue Ethics ought to discuss vices as well, we hope to have done a service to Virtue Ethics more in general: in fact, we believe that the two projects are strongly connected, and that a philosophical analysis of vices can contribute to a better understanding of virtues, as it aims to recognise and articulate the limits of our moral conduct.

Acknowledgements

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